

VZCZCXRO7004
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DE RUEHTA #1916/01 2950938
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 220938Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY ASTANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6700
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE 2079
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1450
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2150
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 1085
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2558
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2861
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFAAA/DIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC 1639
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC 1499
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ASTANA 001916

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, EUR/RPM, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [OSCE](#) [KZ](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: NGOS GIVE GOVERNMENT A PASSING GRADE AT HDIM

REF: ASTANA 1903

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11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: We interviewed several outspoken NGO participants of the Organization for Security and Cooperation and Security (OSCE) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw to check reports that members of the Kazakhstani delegation might have intimidated or threatened NGO participants. Our interlocutors told us that, on the contrary, they were positively impressed with the professionalism and openness of the delegation. Most gave delegation head Ambassador Dzharbusynova high marks for the professional and even-handed way she dealt with the NGOs. Our contacts noted that two members of the delegation did berate participants for fostering "a bad image" of Kazakhstan, but no one among the NGO community takes these threats seriously. END SUMMARY.

"ON THEIR BEST BEHAVIOR"

13. (SBU) Having heard several negative reports about the interaction between Kazakhstan's official delegation and NGOs at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) in Warsaw, we interviewed several HDIM participants to gather their views on the behavior of the Kazakhstani delegation and on the event as a whole. In general, our NGO interlocutors -- most of whom are veteran HDIM participants and never shy about criticizing the Kazakhstani government to anyone who will listen -- were favorably impressed with how the delegation comported itself. Almaty Helsinki Committee's Ninel Fokina told us that the Kazakhstanis were "particularly open, attentive, and even friendly," despite the fact that Kazakhstan faced intense criticism and scrutiny because of its upcoming OSCE Chairmanship. Fokina said some of the debates got heated, but "not out of the ordinary," and in general the exchange of opinions was "civilized." We heard similar views for Freedom House's country director Iva Dobichina, Human Rights Bureau's deputy director Roza Akylbekova, and Astana Human Rights Bureau's Anara Ibrayeva, all of whom told us that the delegation was "on their best behavior" -- cordial and professional, and present at every side-event organized by the NGOs.

HIGH MARKS FOR DZHARBUSYNOVA

¶4. (SBU) Our interlocutors specifically praised Ambassador Madina Dzharbusynova, the head of the delegation, for her equanimity and professionalism in dealing with the NGOs at all the side-events and presentations. Human Rights Bureau's Akylbekova, who was the organizer of the protest during the opening plenary when a large group of civil society activists with "Fair Trial for Zhovtis" t-shirts stood up in the middle of Dzharbusynova's speech, said Dzharbusynova was "a true diplomat," keeping her cool both during and after the speech. Akylbekova apparently spoke to Dzharbusynova, whom she knows personally, after the protest action "to assure her our action was not aimed at her personally, but at the government's policy," and Dzharbusynova was "polite and professional," telling Akylbekova that "you have your job to do, and we [the MFA] have ours." Freedom House's Dobichina told us Dzharbusynova, and most other members of the delegation, were "very respectful" of the NGO participants, and Almaty Helsinki Committee's Fokina specifically credited Dzharbusynova for "making the delegation look decent."

LOW MARKS FOR YERTYSBAYEV AND DOSZHAN

¶5. (SBU) We specifically asked our interlocutors about reports that some delegation members threatened NGO participants with retribution for their negative statements about Kazakhstan. Upon reflection, all pointed to two bad apples in the delegation -- Presidential Advisor Yermukhamet Yertysbayev (reftel) and Ardak Doszhan, the Chairman of the Religious Issues Committee (RIC) in the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). Rozlana Taukina, the President of NGO Journalists in Trouble, told us Yertysbayev pulled her aside after her presentation on freedom of the media and asked her aggressively how she can "face returning to Kazakhstan" after saying such damaging things. When asked whether she did, in fact, fear retribution, she shrugged her shoulders and asked "what can they do?"

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¶6. (SBU) Fokina and Akylbekova told us that RIC's Doszhan berated another NGO participant, Alexandr Klyushev, the President of the Association of Religious Associations of Kazakhstan, for participating in the Zhovtis protest. Doszhan apparently told Klyushev that "a priest should not participate in political actions" and said "we'll talk about this at home." Fokina, who interacts with the RIC and Doszhan frequently on issues of religious freedom, dismissed the threat and told both Klyushev and us "not to take Doszhan too seriously."

¶7. (SBU) When asked whether Dzharbusynova cut off NGO participants during side-events, Freedom House's Dobichina remembered one such instance, but said that the NGO representative had "veered far from the topic." "I was glad Dzharbusynova brought us back on track," said Dobichina. She underlined that on the whole, Dzharbusynova did a "very good job" of leading the delegation.

¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: It seems that, on the whole, the NGO participants came away with a favorable impression of how the Kazakhstani delegation conducted itself in Warsaw. It is true that Yertysbayev and Doszhan comported themselves extremely poorly, and we are perplexed as to why they were sent to this high-profile forum. As a rule, our interlocutors are not shy about criticizing the government, both at home and abroad, and they are not people who are easily intimidated. We believe that they speak frankly and honestly with us, and we have no reason to suspect that this time is any different. END COMMENT.

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